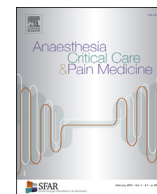




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Letter to the Editor

Oxford-AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine-induced cerebral venous thrombosis and thrombocytopenia: A missed opportunity for a rapid return of experience


Dear Editor,

Oxford-AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccination started in France the 6th of February 2021, with 3.7 million doses being administered on the 25th of April 2021. The 21st and 23rd of March 2021, we had to manage in the ICU two patients with severe cerebral venous thrombosis associated with thrombocytopenia in the context of recent vaccination. Progressive severe disorders of consciousness developed and decompressive craniectomy was performed in both patients.

We were aware of the possibility of cerebral venous thrombosis after COVID-19 vaccination, and the declaration to our regional pharmacovigilance centre was made on the 23rd of March 2021. We would like, however, to share the difficulties we had to find reliable clinical information in this context.

Our knowledge of the pathophysiology and therapeutic possibilities was very limited. Several major issues were questioned as the performances of detection methods for antibodies against platelet factor 4 (PF4)/heparin complex, possible efficacy of steroids, intravenous immunoglobulins, plasma exchange, or choice of anticoagulants.

A search on PubMed database on the 22nd and 23rd of March 2021 did not find any relevant publications. A Google search found a release from a German group on the subject (first in German language on the 19th of March, and secondly in English language on the 22nd of March 2021) (https://gth-online.org/wpcontent/uploads/2021/03/GTH_Stellungnahme_AstraZeneca_engl_3_22_2021.pdf). Based on case series, the GTH (Gesellschaft für Thrombose- und Hämostaseforschung, Germany) proposed a diagnosis algorithm for screening test based on "immunological detection of antibodies against the platelet factor 4 (PF4)/heparin complex. In case this test is negative, a heparin-induced thrombocytopenia (HIT)-like specific immunological cause of thrombosis/thrombocytopenia can be ruled out... and critical thromboses such as sinus/cerebral or splanchnic vein thrombosis, the pro-thrombotic pathomechanism can very likely be interrupted by the administration of high-dose intravenous immunoglobulins..."

This was the only reliable information we had at this time. Without information and feedback from similar cases, we felt like engaging in shady dealings without really understanding the pathophysiological processes of the disease and the risks/benefits balance of therapeutic options.

In the first days of the management of these patients, we organised videoconference meetings with the local and national experts (vascular neurologists, neurointensivists, neuroradiologists, haemostasis specialists, internal medicine and virologists) sharing the knowledge and the possible cases occurring in France and around the world.

In our two patients, the anti-PF4 antibodies were negative (Latex Immunoturbidimetric Assay HemosIL® HIT-Ab (PF4-H) performed using the ACL TOP® instrument). Despite early and aggressive treatment of these two cases of severe cerebral venous thrombosis, the medical management of anticoagulant therapy and thrombocytopenia in this specific post-vaccination context was complex. The predominantly thrombotic clinical expression and the absence of anti-PF4 antibodies, which could have been evidence of spontaneous heparin-induced thrombocytopenia, led to consider that thrombocytopenia was of autoimmune mechanism that may be induced by vaccine. Thrombotic anti-phospholipid syndrome was ruled out in both patients by negative testing for Lupus anticoagulants, anticardiolipin antibodies (ELISA), and anti-β2-glycoprotein I antibodies in plasma. The JAK2 V617F mutation was not present. Paroxysmal nocturnal haemoglobinuria was ruled out in both patients by absence of haemolytic anaemia and normal levels of bilirubin, haptoglobin and reticulocytes.

In the hypothesis of immunological thrombocytopenia, heparin was continued and associated with corticosteroids followed by intravenous immunoglobulins in one patient. Later, we had the confirmation of a definite case of a Vaccine-induced Immune cerebral venous Thrombosis and Thrombocytopenia (VITT syndrome) with the help of an expert laboratory and the detection of significant levels of IgG antibodies to PF4 by ELISA when the samples were analysed with the method using polyvinylsulfonate-PF4 (LIFECODES PF4 IgG, Immucor®) and with strong platelet activation confirmed by a sensitised PF4-supplemented Serotonin Release Assay [1].

Unfortunately, both patients had unfavourable outcome with refractory intracranial hypertension leading to death. More than 10 days after the death of our two patients, cases of VITT were published online on the 9th and 16th of April 2021 [2–4], representing a total of 39 cases. Guidance produced from the Expert Haematology Panel (UK) for the diagnosis and management of VITT was released online on the 1st of April 2021 (<https://b-s-h.org.uk/about-us/news/covid-19-updates/>). We participated in the production of French Guidance published on the 2nd of April 2021 (<https://site.geht.org/app/uploads/2021/04/prise-en-charge-en-urgence-TVC-contexte-vaccination-anticovid-SFNV-SFMV-GFHT-V2-02042021.pdf>). Both publications highlighted the poor performances of rapid anti-PF4 antibodies detection in this context.

We retrospectively performed an analysis of the reports of venous embolic or thromboembolic reports with thrombocytopenia after AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine recorded in VigiBase® (World Health Organization pharmacovigilance database). Between the 1st of February and the 23rd of April 2021, 298 cases were reported (no cases recorded in January), coming from UK, Germany, Spain, Italy, France, Netherlands, Austria, Norway, Australia, Finland, Sweden, Belgium, Hungary, Latvia, North Macedonia and Poland. Sixty-one per cent were reported by UK. Interestingly, 67 cases (22%) were registered to pharmacovigilance

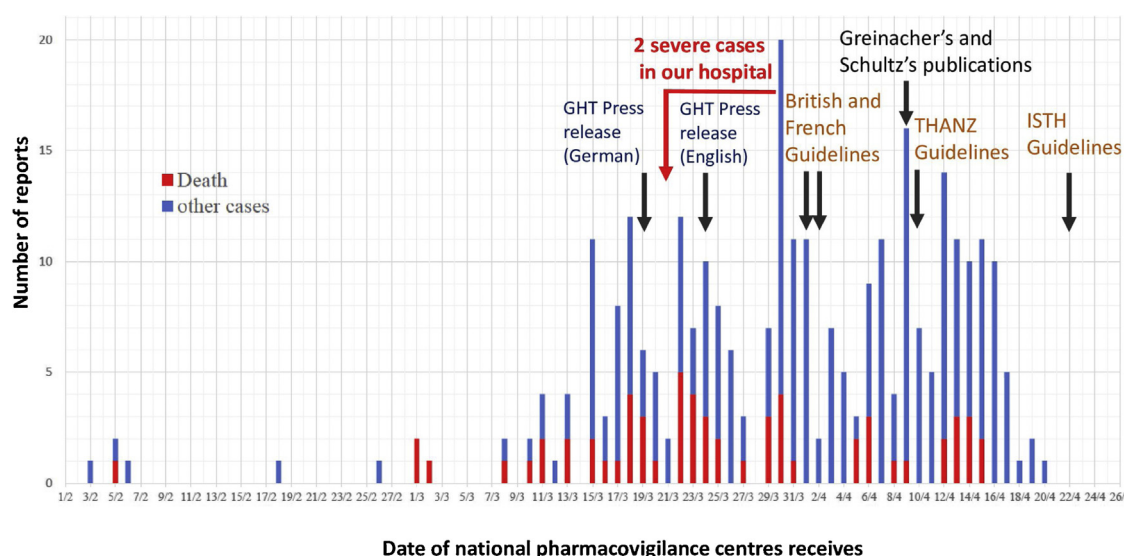


Fig. 1. Number of reports of possible AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine-induced venous thrombosis and thrombocytopenia according to the registration date by the national pharmacovigilance centres in VigiBase[®].

Abbreviations: ISTH: International Society on Thrombosis and Haemostasis, GHT: Gesellschaft für Thrombose- und Hämostaseforschung, Germany; THANZ: Thrombosis and Haemostasis Society of Australia and New Zealand; VigiBase[®]: The World Health Organization global individual case safety report database.

centres before the admission of our two patients, with 18 of them leading to death (Fig. 1).

We believe that an early exchange between clinicians who reported similar events would have been very useful. Organising such a rapid online feedback, focusing on bedside experiences of clinicians facing similar critical situations would have probably avoided the pitfalls of a new and poorly known disease. A recent article (13rd of April) from *The Guardian*, described how UK doctors managed in early March the cases of thrombosis and thrombocytopenia after COVID-19 vaccine (<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2021/apr/13/how-uk-doctor-marie-scully-blood-clotting-link-astrazeneca-covid-jab-university-college-london-hospital>). Exchange of information on a daily basis was performed through e-mails to colleagues and creation of a WhatsApp group. This probably allowed an effective exchange of information between members of this group, but did not allow an effective feedback to those outside the group. Professional networks, sometimes linked to scientific societies, can probably contribute a lot by allowing contact between physicians, quickly drafting guidelines and disseminating them through their usual network. They are however highly dependent on effective early warning systems.

We propose that, in the case of serious and life-threatening conditions, pharmacovigilance agencies, in addition to collecting and analysing serious events, should propose the possibility of a rapid contact between clinicians who have reported similar events via an exchange of e-mail addresses or the creation of discussion forums, on a global and international scale. As publication process for original articles and guidelines requires several weeks, this rapid feedback and sharing of information seem essential in such situations with new, serious, life-threatening and potentially frequent adverse events, for which the scientific knowledge and clinical experience are very limited.

Medical research has succeeded in producing COVID-19 vaccines in a timeframe never achieved before. This should be combined with efficient, rapid, and truly collaborative pharmacovigilance, trying to overcome industrial, national, academic or personal interests.

Conflicts of interest

The authors have no competing interest to declare.

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Thomas Geeraerts^{a,b,*}, François Montastruc^{c,d}, Fabrice Bonneville^{b,e}, Vincent Mémier^f, Nicolas Raposo^{b,g}, Toulouse Vitt Study Group^{**}, Jean Darcourt^h, Maxime Pommierⁱ, Fanny Vardon-Bouinesⁱ, Muriel Alvarez^j, Jacques Izopet^k, Sophie Voisin^l, Pierre Sié^l, Franck Roux^m, Jean Marc Olivierⁿ, Jean-François Albuherⁿ

^bDepartment of Neuroradiology, Toulouse University Hospital, University Toulouse 3-Paul Sabatier, Toulouse, France

ⁱDepartment of Anaesthesiology and Critical Care, Toulouse University Hospital, University Toulouse 3-Paul Sabatier, Toulouse, France

^jDepartment of Tropical and Infectious Diseases, Toulouse University Hospital, University Toulouse 3-Paul Sabatier, Toulouse, France

^kDepartment of Virology, Toulouse University Hospital, University
Toulouse 3-Paul Sabatier, INSERM UMR1043/CNRS UMR5282, Centre for
Pathophysiology of Toulouse Purpan, France

^lHaematology Laboratory, Toulouse University Hospital, University
Toulouse 3-Paul Sabatier, Toulouse, France

^mDepartment of Neurosurgery, Toulouse University Hospital, University
Toulouse 3-Paul Sabatier, Toulouse, France

ⁿDepartment of Neurology, Toulouse University Hospital, University
Toulouse 3-Paul Sabatier, Toulouse, France

^aDepartment of Anaesthesiology and Critical Care, Toulouse University
Hospital, University Toulouse 3-Paul Sabatier, Toulouse, France

^bToulouse Neuroimaging Center (Tonic), University Paul Sabatier,
INSERM, Toulouse, France

^cDepartment of Medical and Clinical Pharmacology, Centre of
Pharmacovigilance and Pharmacoepidemiology, Toulouse University
Hospital (CHU), Faculty of Medicine, Toulouse, France

^dCIC 1436, Team PEPSS « Pharmacologie En Population cohorteS et
biobanqueS », Toulouse University Hospital, France

^eDepartment of Neuroradiology, Toulouse University Hospital, University
Toulouse 3-Paul Sabatier, Toulouse, France

^fHaematology Laboratory, Toulouse University Hospital, University
Toulouse 3-Paul Sabatier, Toulouse, France

^gDepartment of Neurology, Toulouse University Hospital, University
Toulouse 3-Paul Sabatier, Toulouse, France

*Corresponding author at: Coordination d'Anesthésie, CHU Toulouse,
Hôpital Pierre Paul Riquet, 31059 Toulouse, France

E-mail address: geeraerts.t@chu-toulouse.fr (T. Geeraerts).

**Toulouse VITT Study Group: Jean Darcourt, Maxime Pommier, Fanny
Vardon-Boues, Muriel Alvarez, Jacques Izopet, Sophie Voisin, Pierre
Sié, Franck Roux, Jean Marc Olivot, Jean-François Albucher.

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